DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 351 FL 016 290

AUTHOR Christensen, Torkil
TITLE An Approach to English Composition for College Freshmen in an EFL Situation.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Hokusei Womens Junior College Kiyo; v23 p79-86 1986

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; College Freshmen; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Language Proficiency; *Language Skills; Second Language Instruction; Self Esteem; *Skill Development; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Exercises; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Japan; Japanese People

ABSTRACT

A technique for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) that requires students to write relatively simple English in large volume has been successful in developing both language skills and self-confidence. Students rewrite stories to reflect situations and conditions different from those in the original telling; for example, by changing the voice (subjective to objective) or time (past to future). Each rewritten story is read and corrected by a fellow student before being submitted to the teacher. The approach is suggested for use for a limited period with students who have studied considerable English but have written little or are reluctant to express themselves in English. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED281351

An Approach to English Composition for College Freshmen in an EFL Situation

Torkil Christensen

聖星学園女子短期大学紀要
第 23 号　別 刷

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
T. Christensen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

FL016290

April 1986

An Approach to English Composition for College Freshmen in an EFL Situation

Torkil Christensen

Abstract

The approach to English composition detailed here involves the rewriting of model stories to conform to specified situations. It enables students to write large volumes of correct English without the use of dictionaries or rephrasing into Japanese. It has proven useful with college freshmen, and is suited to help students develop confidence in their writing ability.

Introduction

The study and teaching of composition at the college level in Japan is conducted with a number of different methods, some having long traditions and some introduced more recently. The methods include translation, grammatical manipulation (Bell, 1984; Wormack, 1984), sentence combining (Kelly, 1985), paragraph writing (Bander, 1980), diary writing, and the writing of papers (compositions) in English (Oshima, 1983; Blanton, 1981). These methods are all presently used and they are practicable and potentially productive for motivated students with confidence in their English writing ability. However, they suffer from a number of drawbacks for college freshmen just out of high school, who have limited experience in writing English, a very considerable store of partially digested grammar knowledge, a propensity to literal word by word analysis, and rely heavily on dictionaries.

The potential drawbacks of these methods may be detailed as follows: Translation into English without a good command of written English will be laborious and the writing that results is often not good (or even understandable) English. Grammatical manipulation disconnects form and meaning and does not produce complete compositions. Sentence combining requires sense for and confidence in determining what parts of sentences, in unnatural sentence sequences to eliminate, and how to integrate these. Paragraph writing concentrates on a part of the writing process that for an inexperienced writer is very theoretical and does not result in complete compositions. Diary writing with 40 or 50 students makes the correction work for the teacher considerable and it may become difficult to cope with and respond to the needs of all students in a class. Writing full papers requires the students to have confidence in their writing skills, and with college freshmen it initially leads to very poor results, which may lead students to develop (or maintain) poor opinions of their English writing ability.

The approach to be detailed here was selected to overcome these drawbacks by having

A short version of this paper was presented at the 1985 JACET conference in Nagoya and is available in the proceedings from that conference (in Japanese).

the students write comparatively simple, correct English in large volumes, and so develop confidence in their ability to write in English. It makes correction work managable, and has the studets concentrate on meaning while not ignoring the skills acquired in high school. Further, the approach makes it unnecessary for the students to refer back to Japanese while writing, and so eliminates problems with reliance on dictionaries and overly bookish and structurally correct but unusual English.

Composition by the approach here involves the rewriting of stories to reflect situations and conditions different from those in the original story. Some examples are the changing of a story from subjective (I) to objective (he or she) or changing the time the story is happening (past to future).

A unit consists of a 100 to 200 word story that is provided with a clearly specified context. Instructions are provided for rewriting the story three to five times by imagining situations different from those in the original. The students are expected to complete one such unit every lesson, and the completed unit is first read by a fellow student who points out mistakes which are corrected before the instructor goes over the completed unit. An example of such a story can be found in the appendix.

The approach has been used with first year students at a junior college and the output is large volumes of "correct" English where close attention has been paid to meaning and relevancy in the specified situations.

In teaching English composition, this approach should not be used exclusively, but for a limited period with students who have studied a considerable amount of English but have written little, and maybe suffer from poor confidence in writing English, it helps the students to get to write and express themselves in English. This would enable the study to move on to a more free study style involving real wirting in English, perhaps via the other approaches mentioned above.

The results of the first year of using the approach supports this intuitive conclusion, students subjected to the approach hand in compositions more readily than students who have studied with traditional methods.

Details of the Approach

The details of the apporoach will be discussed in three parts. First the details of the assignments (units), then the students work, and finally the instructors role in the study is described.

The assignments

The study with the approach here progresses in units, one unit being based on a model story. The students have the model story and instructions for three to five rewritings of the story (example in appendix). They are expected to complete a unit in one class-period (90 min) and one semester covers about a dozen units. After completing the unit the students ask fellow students to read through the rewritings, comment on irregularities, and sign their names to show who checked the story. When this is complete the unit is ready for the instructor to look through. The whole process may not be completed during

one lesson and the unfinished parts are left as homework.

The stories used in the assignments purport to be letters, parts of letters, and parts of diary entries. They are easily comprehensible, only minimal use of dictionaries is necessary, and the students are encouraged to guess meanings and not rely on dictionaries.

The rewritings generally concern the characters, the time, the place, the structure, or mood of the stories. This may involve changing from subjective to objective (I to he or she), singular to plural (I to us or them), from past to present (imagining the person in the role of a radio announcer), past to future (to become a hoped for happening), and changes of seasons. Another rewriting is to change the place detailed in a story (Singapore to Sapporo). This involves the replacement of facts and figures for the new place, some provided with the instructions and some left for the students to search for.

Another type of rewriting involves the joining of sentences. The assigned stories generally consist of short concise sentences, and students are requested to join two or three of these with suitable connecting words. Reverse connections (a sentence put before and connected to the one originally before it) have also been requested. This is not to be confused with the sentence combining mentioned above. The stories are written so that it is not necessary (although of course possible) to discard parts of the sentences when joining them together. The instructions have been in English, and after the first lesson the students generally have little trouble comprehending these. However, when a student feels unsure the instructor is available to advise and explain, and when unexpected or wrong responses appear, the instructor may check that the students have made the situation of the rewriting clear to themselves. With a single exception, the various rewritings have been performed with great accuracy and understanding. The exception is with connecting sentences, here the students have trouble evaluating the impact of certain connecting words on the meaning of the complete sentence. The reverse connecting is performed accurately and with ease.

Further rewritings have involved the addition of descriptive words and phrases to the original, somewhat colorless stories, to express the writers feelings attitudes and opinions. It has been done mechanically (a set number of words to be added per sentence) or freely (the frequency left for the students to decide). What attitude to express has been specified (happy, unhappy), or at times left to the student to specify, and add color accordingly.

The students seem reluctant to add words to show feelings and opinions, and if specific instructions are not given the additions are very few and inadequate. Specifying the number of words to be added overcomes the problem and the added words then generally show good sense.

A number of further activities have also been tied in with the rewritings, these include stretching sentences, ordering garbled stories and adding sentences to make stories more complete and detailed.

To provide opportunities for more realistic composition writing, the units generally contain one request for individualizing the original story. This is usually the last of the rewritings and there are large differences in the lengths of these compositions, about

half of the students base this free composition on the style and content of the model story.

A number of other issues that the students bring to composition classes as freshmen may also be handled through the approach here. The apparent difficulty students have not to begin every sentence on a new line, or the distinction some students put between composition and other writing may be overcome by having them work with the material, rather than convince them through verbal explanations.

Problems in the use of articles have also been approached in some of the units here. As the approach utilizes a clearly defined situation it is possible to frame rules for article use that can be applied to the examples in a unit. The optional character of some articles can be discussed with the students, and by reading other students' responses they may get into such discussions themselves. If students have difficulty agreeing or are not sure, the instructor is available to mediate and give the details necessary to make an informed selection.

In the teaching, the instructor is free to decide how strict the instructions are to be followed. Some instructors may wish the students to follow instructions to the letter, while others may accept looser interpretations. This makes it possible for instructors to teach in the manner they are comfortable with, without sacrificing the direct English-English qualities of the approach. It is of course also possible to incorporate and expand specific points that an instructor feels the students have not learned adequately.

The students' work

The students have the assignments in written form, and after a short explanation by the instructor they are asked to start writing. While writing there is little need for consulting the dictionary and most have refrained from this. The class period is spent writing the responses or reading fellow students' responses. The volume of writing to be completed for one unit is considerable but most students manage to complete at least the major part of the assignment in class. During the lesson they are constantly writing, and they hand in completed assignments when two or three are ready, and they have been instructed to see that they are not more than one or two units behind.

The instructor

Except for the short initial explanation of the new unit the instructor is not addressing the whole class during the lesson. The time is available to check on the work being performed, and respond to questions from the students. When handing back completed and corrected units there is time to talk to every student about problems there may be in these units. Some students ask more questions than others but generally there is ample time available for discussion with all students. Students are requested to hand in their notebooks when two or three units have been completed and these are given back with corrections in the following lesson. Reading through the completed assignments is simple, and as there is time for discussing individual problems with the students in class, corrections need not be elaborate. Minor corrections are only noted or discussed. However, when

students have misunderstood instructions and the result deviated considerably from the expected, or where students obviously did not understand what they were doing, rewriting of these parts has been requested.

Background and Response to the Approach

The approach detailed above was introduced in response to the special needs and potentials of college freshmen. As detailed in the introduction a number of other approaches to the teaching of composition are currently employed in colleges in Japan. All the approaches appear feasible and potentially beneficial at some point of the students progress towards mastery of written English, however the approach detailed here is the one most closely tailored to the needs of college freshmen.

The students enter college with a low opinion of their abilities in English. At the same time they have at least six years of English instruction and so possess a considerable knowledge of English; especially their grammar knowledge is extensive. They have further engaged in much analysis of English, putting it into Japanese or vice versa. Still, the volume of English that they have been in contact with is limited, and it has rarely been presented without recourse to copious rephrasings and explanations in Japanese.

The approach here provides the students with assignments that are not very difficult, enabling them to write easily, and so potentially gain a better opinion of their own English. In completing the assignments they can utilize the analytical skills and grammar knowledge they have, and there is no need to depend on rephrasings into Japanese.

When having to write English most students automatically start from Japanese, which they translate into English (not always writing down the Japanese original). They do not start with simple understandable English but consult dictionaries extensively, and frequently get slowed down in looking up words or phrases. To try to repress this reaction the instructor may wish to encourage the students, from the first lesson, to write copiously in English that they can easily use, to make them feel that writing in English is easily accomplished and not a laborious chore. For the instructor the large number of students makes it necessary to ensure that correction is managable and the needs of the students require that corrections are few and do not reinforce the negative attitudes the students already have about their ability to write English.

The approach here requires the students to write English that is managable to the students and that needs few corrections, thus keeping correction work managable and not discouraging the students, further it is possible for both students and teacher to easily understand the contents when read.

The wide variety of abilities in writing English displayed by the students in a class may also make the instructor wish to provide detailed individual guidance without having to stop the work of the whole class. Further, it appears desirable to provide a variety of assignments, as well as to put stress on connecting the writing with specific realistic situations that both students and instructor are well aware of.

The approach here accommodates these concerns by having all students write throughout the lessons, and write material that is generally within their abilities, permitting

unsupervised work. This frees the instructor to pay attention to those students who need more explanations and to check, by reading over the students' shoulders, that the writing is acceptable and follows the instructions. As the situations are clearly specified and known to both instructor and student, it becomes possible to point out instances where students have not made the situations clear to themselves, and to correct this.

The approach then pays attention to a number of the skills as well as potential problems that students newly out of high school often display. However the approach is not the only one available for teaching English composition, and it alone would not be sufficient to bring the students to a mastery of written English. However, in the special circumstances of a college freshman class it is a practial and productive appoach.

Student reactions to the approach have not been entirely clear, the assignments are completed punctually and willingly. In the second year the same number of students subjected to this approach in the first year took composition as an elective subject and they are less likely to fall behind in the second year assignments.

Second-year composition was taken by 65 students (49 required and 16 elective). The second year study involves the writing of one composition every lesson, without deadlines but with the requirement that all compositions must be handed in at the end of a semester. The results two weeks before and at the start of the winter holidays in 1985 (end of 2. semester) are shown in Table. 1. The numbers show that on the average the students who studied with the approach (A) hand in compositions earlier, and catch up easier than the other (B) students, the differences for both cut-off times are statistically significant ($p<.001$). Interviews with students tend to confirm that the A students feel less aversion to writing in English, and some directly ascribe this to the approach here.

Two weeks before winterholidays		At start of winterholidays	In the two weeks
A (27 students)	6.93±1.75	11.52±1.05	4.59
B (38 students)	5.29±2.08	9.05±2.70	3.78
Assignment total	10	12	2.00
t-value A vs. B	3.44	5.12	

Table. 1: Average of actually handed in compositions and maximum possible number of compositions per student two weeks before and at start of winterholidays, with correllations for the two groups. Both correllation values are significant at the .001 level. A: have studied with the approach detailed here. B: have not studied with the approach here.

These evalutions are still somewhat subjective and the results of a single year cannot be considered an adequate test of the efficacy of the approach. Further study of the effects will be necessary. Minimally however the approach here is clearly a sufficient preparation for further studies, that is not inferior to other approaches.

Conclusions

The approach here addresses a number of problems that students and instructors face

in English composition in first year college classes. Initial results appear to show that students studying with the approach become more readily able to write in English. The approach needs not be limited to the college level and may be used in high schools or generally with students who have a poor opinion of their English writing abilities, or are reluctant to write due to the percieved difficulty of the task. After some study with this approach it will be possible to turn to other more directly productive approaches. The approach does not obviate the need for other approaches, rather it prepares students to perform these with greater confidence.

References

Bander, R. G. *From Sentence to Paragraph.* Holt Rinehart Winston, New York, 1980.

Bell, W., and S. Saito. *Write Right.* Seibido, Tokyo, 1975.

Blanton, Linda L. *Intermediate Composition Practice.* Newbury House Publishers, Rowley, Mass., 1981.

Christensen, Torkil 教養課程における英作文の新しい指導法 in 第24回大学英語教育学会全国大会プロシーディングズ. JACET, Tokyo, 1986.

Kelly, C., and I. Shortreed. *Significant Scribbles.* Lingual House, Tokyo, 1985.

Oshima, A., and A. Hogue. *Writing Academic English.* Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Reading Mass., 1983.

Womack, T., and S. Miura. *Approaching English Sentences.* Seibido, Tokyo, 1984.

Appendix

Example of story for rewriting:

This is from Kimiko's diary. She wrote it after she went skiing during the holidays last spring:

Today I went skiing at Nakayama Pass. I went by the 7:30 bus and arrived at the ski-field one hour later. There were not so many people and after buying lift-tickets I went to the top of the slope. The weather was cloudy but the snow condition was very good. It was easy to get down as there were few people on the slope. Near the skilift I met some friends, they had come by car.

I went up again, and now the sun was out so the view from the top was wonderful. Going down was very exciting. More and more people were arriving and now I had to wait at the lift, still I had eight runs before lunch.

I had lunch with my friends, they were also having a wonderful time. We ate and talked for one hour and I had a few more runs before I caught the bus at 16:00. Back home I was very tired and went to bed early.

1) Please rewrite the story imagining Kimiko went with two of her cousins.
2) Please rewrite the story imagining Kimiko is going on the trip tomorrow, she is going alone. Use: perhaps, if, I hope, maybe, then, I'm sure, etc.
3) Add 2 or 3 words to each sentence to make it more interesting, and write it all.
4) Write about a ski trip you took or will take - even when you can't ski.